

AN ADDRESS
IN COMMEMORATION OF THE ORDINATION
AND SETTLEMENT OF
REV. JOHN HANCOCK

OVER



THE PARISH OF CAMBRIDGE FARMS
NOW LEXINGTON,

BY
REV. CARLTON A. STAPLES,
NOVEMBER 2, 1898.

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IN COMMEMORATION OF
THE ORDINATION AND SETTLEMENT OF
JOHN HANCOCK,
NOV. 2, 1698,
OVER CAMBRIDGE FARMS PARISH,
[NOW LEXINGTON]
IN THE
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[UNITARIAN]
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HISTORICAL ADDRESS.

This evening we are to turn back the pages of history two hundred years. What are the conditions under which the people of the parish of Cambridge Farms, now Lexington, are living? After a long struggle to retain it, Massachusetts has been deprived of her colonial charter and made a Province of Great Britain. Her governor is no longer elected by the people, but appointed by royal authority. William III., of blessed memory to the Protestant heart, is king and legal meetings here are warned in his majesty's name. The parish, then considerably larger than the present town of Lexington in territory, contains, as supposed, hardly more than three hundred inhabitants, or from thirty to forty families. In 1698, Boston had a population of seven thousand, as stated by Cotton Mather— not twice as large as Lexington to-day. This village possibly contains half a dozen dwellings. Originally its site was nearly all comprised in one large grant of 600 acres held by the Pelham family, and only recently divided and sold in three equal tracts. Not fifty persons probably are living within the bounds of what is now called "Lexington Centre." Of these are the families of Benj. Muzzey, on the Stetson place; John Munroe, near Belfry Hill; Joseph Estabrook, on the Plumer place, and Jonathan Poulter, in the vicinity of the Baptist Church. These are all we can positively identify as living within the limits of this village when John Hancock, then a young man

of twenty-six, came, in 1697, to preach as a candidate to succeed Rev. Benj. Estabrook, recently deceased. The people to whom he was to minister are an humble, feeble folk, widely scattered, living for the most part on lonely farms, reached by roads that are mere cart paths cut through the woods. Large pine swamps extend on the west and on the north of what is now the village, and where crossed by the Concord road, the road is called "the Causey," or causeway—built upon logs, probably, over a sunken marsh, where to-day are fertile gardens and fields.

Such, in brief, are some of the natural features of the place to which the young preacher came, as the picture is made out from the public records. The meeting house stood at the south end of the common, where the watering trough now is, erected a few years before—probably a frame building, but of what dimensions, or style of architecture, there is no knowledge. We are told that upper galleries were put in as the congregation increased. What is called a "Turriott" (turret) stood near it where the bell was hung. Hard by were the stocks, a terror to Sabbath breakers and other evil doers, but fortunately no record was kept of those put therein, much to the satisfaction of their descendants. The bell was a present from the mother church of Cambridge to this parish, the youngest of her four daughters—the churches in Chelmsford, Billerica and Newton being elder members of her family. Within the house were long benches, arranged on opposite sides of the principal aisle, separating the men from the women, the boys sitting in the rear, where, as the record says, "they might be inspected" by the tithing men, set to watch over the congregation and prevent any sleeping, laughing, or other improper conduct.

The people were seated according to their age, property, or importance in the community, magistrates and old people having seats nearest the pulpit. The seating of the meeting house was a matter of great difficulty and delicacy, causing often much hard and bitter feeling, since the estimate of a person's importance made by the Committee often differed materially from his own. Here it was voted that in seating they should have respect only to Real Estate, and to one head of the family, and that all the people should bring in their ages before a given date to the Selectmen, that the seating may be correctly done. Nothing is said of pews in the meeting-house, before the second house was erected in 1713, when space was sold for them on the floor, each man built his own pew and families were allowed to sit together. In reseating the meeting house, from time to time, it was voted that no man should be degraded, that is, be assigned to a lower place than he was occupying. But how strange and trivial this contention appears over the position of one's seat in the meeting where the people came to worship God. They wanted it to indicate their standing in wealth, authority and social importance; back-woods farmers and their wives, living in a hard, poor way, strenuous to be so placed that all might know their relative position to their neighbors in age, in real estate and in social standing. There was unquestionably a great respect among the New England Puritans for these distinctions and they recognized them, even in the house of God. This respect for rank in society was carried into the college. In the early catalogues of Harvard, students are arranged on that principle. Names were not printed alphabetically, nor according to scholarship, but to

the wealth and social position of their parents. Sons of magistrates and large landed proprietors, merchants and ministers came first on the list, and after them the sons of farmers, mechanics and laborers. John Hancock could not have stood very high on such a catalogue, since he was the son of a Cambridge shoe maker, Dea. Nathaniel Hancock, living in that part of Cambridge now known as Newton. When he came to preach here and looked down upon the congregation from the high pulpit, he could tell at a glance where the people stood financially and socially in respect to each other, whether the Bowmans were richer than the Bridges, or the Munroes than the Reeds, or the Cutlers than the Wellingtons, or the Muzzeyes than the Fiskes. But let us enquire,—what is known of the preacher himself? Nine years before coming here he had graduated from Harvard. The intervening time was spent in teaching school, preparing for the ministry and in preaching to the churches in Groton and in Medford. He seems to have ministered here for nearly a year before his ordination and settlement. At first there was some opposition to giving him a call between the church and the parish (voting as they did separately), but finally they united in a nearly unanimous vote in his favor, and the service of ordination was appointed for Nov. 2nd, 1698. Allowing eleven days for the change from old style dating to new, it makes it the 13th of Nov., just two hundred years ago this day. Five churches were represented by their pastors and delegates in the service, viz: the Old South of Boston, the church in Cambridge, in Newton, in Concord and in Woburn. Mr. Hancock preached his own ordination sermon. Dr. Samuel Willard, of Boston,

gave him the charge, which it is to be hoped was not drawn out to the extent of his lectures on the Assembly's Shorter Catechism as published in his "Body of Divinity," which contains two hundred and fifty lectures upon that lucid statement of Christian doctrine. Rev. Joseph Estabrook, of Concord, gave the Right Hand of Fellowship, and "the elders assisted by the laying on of hands." Mr. Hancock's salary was fixed at £40. with an additional £40. as a settlement, or gift, to be paid during that and the following year. A sum paid as a settlement was a custom of the New England churches which unfortunately has long since been abandoned. Doubtless it had the effect of prolonging the pastorates. Since the people thereby escaped paying frequent settlements, they bore more patiently with the minister's failings and let him remain until the Lord called him home. Thus by retaining Mr. Hancock fifty-five years, the people saved the payment of another settlement for more than half a century.

Scarcely had Mr. Hancock been ordained before he began planning to make himself a permanent home among his people. He was settled for life when but 27, and had a reasonable expectation of many years of usefulness and happiness to come. Accordingly he buys a fifty acre tract of land of Benj. Muzzey, a part of Pelham Manor, extending from the Common on both sides of what is now Hancock street for a considerable distance, and here he soon began the erection of a humble dwelling, hardly larger than a single room in some of the spacious houses of the town to-day. Probably before the cage was finished the bird to sing in it had been already captured, and soon after was brought from the parent nest to

adorn and glorify the young minister's home. A minister's daughter, a minister's granddaughter and a minister's great-granddaughter, how could it be otherwise than that Elizabeth Clark should be a minister's wife, fit to be the mother of ministers, of statesman and of merchant princes, the grandmother and great grandmother of men and women distinguished in theology, in literature, in science, in philanthropy; as teachers, as physicians, and in all the industries of life. The Town Clerk of Chelmsford sends this record. "John Hancock, of North Cambridge, and Elizabeth Clark, of Chelmsford, were married Dec. 11th, 1700, by Rev. Thomas Clark." The bride's mother, Mary, was the daughter of Rev. Edward Bulkley, of Concord, who was the son of Rev. Peter Bulkley, the founder and father of that town. Who will say that blood does not tell, when we trace from that humble home of John and Elizabeth Hancock a long line of men and women of high moral, intellectual and religious character who in so many ways rendered grand service to the state, the church and the nation? Nearly thirty ministers, teachers, college professors, doctors and lawyers may be traced back to that venerable house, or were in some way connected with it, showing that spacious and splendid dwellings are not required to bring forth noble manhood and womanhood and leave an influence for good that tells on ages to come; but a life of industry, of integrity, of intelligence and of piety maintained in the home. Out of such homes as that founded by John and Elizabeth Hancock, in houses not half as comfortable as many stables and barns of to-day, out of conditions thus cramped and poor, came the men and women who, for the most part, have been foremost in all departments of human

activity and progress; not because the environments were coarse and mean, but because the life there was consecrated to duty, to truth, and to God; while all that wealth and learning, art and taste may do to refine and adorn the home counts for little and often miserably fails to create and exert any elevating influence upon society. The forming, guiding force of moral and religious life is not in them.

But what of John Hancock's ministry during the fifty-five years of its continuance in the parish and town? What was he doing here for this period of more than half a century? Two services were held on Sunday throughout the year, with no vacation for minister or people, which means the preaching of more than 2000 sermons. They were generally written discourses, as I judge from an entry in his Common Place book where he says, "preaching without MSS. and good sense seldom go together." Nor are we to think of these sermons as petty fifteen minute productions "pronounced trippingly on the tongue," but solid, thoughtful discourses of an hour's length, upon the profoundest themes of Puritan theology, with copious applications to the state of the hearers. In those days they liked what they called "a painful preacher," and they only complained when his sermons were too short, easily understood and left no ground for disputation during the week. Parson Hancock was a diligent student, a man of wide and varied information, a careful reader of Harvard College library, as his notes and comments abundantly prove, preserved in his Common Place Book. This is a huge mass of extracts and reflections in his hand-writing, beginning when a college student and extending to near the close of his life. They

form an octavo volume of 500 closely written pages, filled to the last line with few exceptions. It contains information upon a multitude of subjects gleaned from the reading and experience of a long life. It is a remarkable production, opening the mind of the man and revealing his habits and character more fully than anything besides. Here are Science, Philosophy, Theology, Medicine, the phenomena of nature, and of animal life, a thousand practical matters relating to the farm, the household, the church and the state, interspersed with scraps of history, biography, the sayings of great men, stories and pungent epigrams, all carefully and systematically arranged under proper headings. Probably from these readings and reflections, he drew the subjects and illustrations of his sermons. If so, he must have been a rare preacher for those days. Not one of the "dry as dust" sort, as so many were, but a preacher who had something interesting to say that had relation to human life around him,—knowledge wholesome and good,—thought that quickened and enlarged thought,—that made a man more of a man for knowing him.

The town once voted that "no writing of a secular concernment should be put up at the meeting house for the people to read on Sunday." As we read the old sermons of a hundred and fifty years ago, or try to read them, we are impressed with the idea that something like this must have stared the minister in the face as he stood in the pulpit,—“Nothing that touches the pressing, vital interests of this world to-day must be spoken here.” Evidently John Hancock stood in no fear of such an admonition. Nor was he that kind of a preacher. He had the sap and vigor of real life. He was a think-

ing, growing man as long as he lived, and so awakened thought and life in the people. A deeply religious man, an earnest, faithful Christian, a tireless worker for the up-building of the church, a strict disciplinarian in guarding its morals and bringing offenders to the bar of confession and repentance. Yet he was no bigot and held no ecclesiastical domination over the people. The subject of his sermon at the ordination of his son Ebenezer as his colleague, is "Ministers are the People's Helpers," and the first point is, ministers have no dominion over men's faith, but they are helpers of their joy. "Let us all be thankful," he says, "that we are delivered from a domineering and tyrannical clergy." And again, "the charity of some is, 'to damn all the world but themselves.'"

"Biblical criticism" did not originate in our day, as the Common Place Book of John Hancock plainly shows. Some of the difficult questions of interpretation he boldly grappled two hundred years ago. Take this discussion of the Noachian Deluge. "How was it possible," he asks, "if the flood was universal, for water enough to have fallen in forty days to have covered the tops of the highest mountains?" He then makes a mathematical calculation showing that it must have taken more than forty years, and then he asks, "What became of all that additional water? But if it was local, confined to Judea, what use was there in building the ark to save Noah and his family?" However, like many other wise men, he leaves the problem unsolved.

Some of the pithy sayings and proverbs recorded are very bright. Thus, he says, "War is a fire struck in the devil's tinder box." "Afflictions are the whetstone of

prayer." "Some men will marry their children to swine for a golden trough." He discusses questions of casuistry with much common sense. Thus, under the head of marriage, he asks, "Is it lawful for an educated Protestant woman to marry a Roman Catholic, if he agrees not to disturb her religion? It would not be sinful for her to marry a pagan, no more to marry a Catholic, especially where better is not to be had." How to deal with a cross husband is illustrated by the example of a worthy Christian woman who had such an affliction to bear. When asked how it was that she managed to live peaceably with him, she replied that when he came home very cross she was as pleasant and agreeable to him as possible, a recipe that would no doubt be equally efficacious in similar cases to-day. These simple records gathered from the Common Place Book show that John Hancock was not a theological or ecclesiastical fossil, but a man of real flesh and blood, with a warm, beating heart, a man in close touch with humanity in its manifold expression and experience; a man who was abreast of the knowledge and progress of his time. Of his preaching, a few printed sermons are preserved in the Harvard library, notably one before Gov. Shute and the General Court, in 1722, entitled "Rulers Are Benefactors of the People." The style is simple and direct, free from much ornament, or attempt at rhetorical display. The truth is plainly spoken. Magistrates and legislators are told how they may be a blessing to the people by an example of integrity and piety, by devotion to the public weal, by cherishing the schools, the college and the church; with admirable counsel to the electors as well as to the elected,—much

of it as pertinent to rulers and voters of to-day as of those of a hundred and seventy years 10. It is no labored exposition of scripture texts and abstract doctrines, but a forcible urging home upon the hearers of their duties as rulers, citizens and Christians,—terse, pungent, practical preaching that they would be better for hearing and heeding. The sermon would come within the limit once declared by a good judge to be the proper one for a religious service. He said “Let it be an hour, with a leaning to mercy.” But the sermon that appears most pleasing and impressive is that already alluded to at the ordination of his son, a young man of remarkable promise, cut off from his work with his father here in 1739, after five years of great usefulness. It has a peculiar interest and value, however, from the fact that there is an introduction, or “preface,” addressed to his people, giving a glimpse of life in Lexington in 1735, a hundred and sixty years ago. First he speaks of the kindness shown to himself and the members of his family during the thirty-two years of his ministry, a respect and kindness which he has observed is sometimes wanting in other places. The inhabitants of this town, he says, are an industrious and thriving people. There are many serious, savory and spiritual Christians among them. There are no drinking clubs or companies that have their appointed times and places to meet and drink and game and spend their precious time, as I know of. If there be, I hope that such of you as are under the oath of God will disperse them. The rising generation have formed a society and hold a religious meeting on the evening after the Sabbath, and it is joyfully increasing. A pleasing picture

of the relations of pastor and people and of their generous treatment of him in settling his son as his assistant, with the additional salary assessed for his support. It is doubtful if a better report could be made to-day of the moral condition of Lexington, notwithstanding it has six ministers instead of one. But that shows how much more difficult it is to instruct and influence the people of to-day than those of a century and a half ago!

The title of Bishop, generally applied to Mr. Hancock, indicates the position he held in the respect of the clergy and the laity as the counsellor and friend of all. It was no assumption of ecclesiastical or dogmatic authority on his part, but an honor awarded him as a wise adviser and pacificator in all church difficulties, as the senior minister of the county for more than thirty years, and the moderator of church councils. So great was the confidence in his wisdom that it is said his parishioners seldom engaged in any new enterprise without asking his advice. Town quarrels and disputes over boundary lines were settled peaceably by his decision as to what justice and equity required, so that for many years there were no appeals to the courts from the people of Lexington. What parson Hancock said ought to be done, was done. His word was law as well as gospel. Members of the church were held to a strict account for all violations of chastity, of temperance, of honesty, of truthfulness, and offenders were obliged to stand up before the congregation and make confession of their wrong doing and ask to be forgiven. Many such cases are recorded in the church book; some among the most wealthy and prominent of his parishioners. He said to the transgressor, you have done

an unjust, an impure, or an unkind thing, and you must repent of it, must come before the people and say so, and promise to do right in time to come. It was done by high and low, rich and poor. Was it the power of fear, or the influence of love, that held strong men and women under this stern rule? I cannot say, but certain it is that he did it. But such publicity given to open and secret sins now, I fear would soon break up the churches and disrupt society.

But there is another phase to John Hancock's character which must not be overlooked. He was a genial, companionable, loveable man, fond of pleasantries and wit, a good story-teller, and not above enjoying or perpetrating a joke. Dr. Appleton, in his funeral sermons on the Sunday following Mr. Hancock's death, speaks of him as cheerful and facetious; so much so as sometimes to startle and shock the soberer brethren. But this endeared him all the more to his parishioners and made him a welcome guest in their homes; a man in sympathy with the humble people around him, entertained by their homely wit and wisdom, who made himself one with them in their sorrows and joys. He was given to hospitality, says Dr. Appleton, and his house was the resort of people of various characters. He adds that ministers of every age were fond of his company, which proves that in spite of their harsher theology and sterner manners, ministers of that day were much like ministers of this day,—fond of one who tells a good story and lightens up the somber hues of life with cheerfulness and laughter. These facts make creditable some traditions of Mr. Hancock related by Theodore Parker, in a letter of his found in Dr. Sprague's *Annals of the American Pulpit*. He says that in his old age some people wished to have elders

appointed in the church to assist him in his duties and two of the deacons waited upon him to propose the matter. Hearing them through he said, I suppose you would be willing to accept the office yourselves. We would be willing, was the reply. But do you know what elders are required to do? No, but we would be glad to learn. Well, they are to groom, saddle and bridle the minister's horse when he wishes to ride, bring it to the door and hold the stirrup for him to mount, and when he goes to other towns on ministerial duties to accompany him and pay the expenses. This was enough; they departed and nothing more was said about appointing elders to assist their minister. And again, we have the story of his call upon the family of a wealthy parishioner when the wife asked him if he would partake of some refreshment, to which he readily assented. Placing before him her largest and best cheese, with other things, she bade him help himself. "But madam," he asked, "where shall I cut this fine cheese?" "Anywhere you please, sir," was the answer. "Well, then, I will cut it at home," and accordingly he carried it away with him. On one occasion, meeting a parishioner, he said, "Brown, I hear that you and your neighbor are quarreling over that boundary line. Now go and bring him out there with both your deeds and let us settle that matter at once." It was done, and looking the land over with the deeds before him, he decided where the line ought to run and fixed the bounds accordingly. Both submitted to his decision; they had implicit confidence in his judgment and his impartial wisdom. Such facts and stories bring vividly before us John Hancock as he was, a man revered and loved by his people, broad-minded, kind-hearted, more ready

to serve than to be served, the promoter of peace in the community, the helper of the people's joy. I cannot think of him as a stern, dogmatic, opinionated, unapproachable Puritan priest, lording it over the faith and the conscience of the people, but as a cheerful, genial, whole-souled Christian minister, striving to do the Master's will in the Master's spirit, a man of good learning and fair intellectual ability, but also of a good conscience and a tender heart.

But what of his theology, it may be asked? No doubt it was like that of all New England ministers of that period. Calvinistic, but of the milder sort, with "a strong leaning towards mercy." In his sermons, so far as I have read them, there is no hard, dogmatic presentation of the terrors of the law on the "Ipse dixit" of any ecclesiastical authority, so much as an appeal to reason, to conscience to the spiritual nature and the law of duty and of love—to what most becomes man as God's child, as Christ's brother, and as the heir of immortal life. As a preacher he was like that famous Connecticut divine who, when asked by a young brother what was the secret of his great success, and of his own failure said, "In fishing for souls, I bait the hook very carefully and let it down gently before the fish, but you fish with a bare hook and throw it at them saying, 'bite, or be damned.'" John Hancock's was the gentle, winning way of love; of good sense, and not of force and terror. And so measured by the standard of elevating influence and of a vigorous church life, his ministry was a true success. With him the preaching of dogma was incidental and subordinate to the preaching of worthy life and Christian character. Noble manhood and womanhood,

helpful deeds, a faithful, loving spirit, were the vital matters, rather than speculative doctrines and the rigid observance of church forms. It is said that he showed no waning of his intellectual and spiritual vigor in the closing years of his long ministry. Great sorrows overshadowed him. His youngest son, Ebenezer, from whose association in the pastorate he had expected support and comfort in his old age, was soon taken away. His oldest son, John, pastor of the church in Quincy, and father of the future Governor John, soon followed. Thomas, the princely merchant of Boston, alone survived to cheer the declining years of his parents. He had enlarged the humble dwelling where their happy married life began and all their children were born, and he sent from his ware-houses whatever was needful for their comfort when the depreciated currency made the salary very meagre. The farm was transferred to him, relieving them from anxiety and trouble, and a negro servant was bought and presented by the town to minister to their needs. Half a century passed away and still the venerable pastor bore up and steered right onward, never losing a jot of heart and hope to the last. The people said he never preached better than on the Sunday, two days before his death, when his text was, "Wist ye not that I must be about my father's business?" The end came December 5th, 1752. He died, no doubt, as he desired, with his harness on and his face to the foe, fighting for the right and the good. Immediately a town meeting was called to see what should be done to provide for "the funeral of our beloved pastor." The sum of £416 O. T. was voted and every preparation made to give his body honorable burial. Mourning rings and badges were distributed

and a brick grave made for the venerable form where it was laid, while a great multitude gathered around weeping for him whom they should behold on earth no more. In the old burying ground, a quiet and beautiful spot, where the dust of his congregation reposes, in a tomb with wife and son and many grandchildren, lies all that is mortal of Rev. John Hancock,—a little handful of dust, after one hundred and forty-six years. But is that all which remains from a life of more than four score years; and a ministry here of more than half a century; from troubles and sorrows patiently borne, truth faithfully sought and boldly proclaimed, prayers for light and guidance from a struggling, trusting soul? Ah no, that cannot be. He was ripened here for nobler service of God and man in the life beyond. Hundreds, yea thousands, have been reached by influences for good that have gone out from that humble home of John and Elizabeth Hancock, from that long ministry of faith and hope and love, from that life of high aims and good works “hid with Christ in God.” This is a better town, a nobler Commonwealth, a more glorious nation for the family John Hancock founded here, and the souls that he instructed, guided and trained to act well their part and help build up the kingdom of God in the world. And so it is fitting that on this 200th anniversary of his settlement over this church and this town, his name should be recalled and honored here, that his work and his life may be held in grateful remembrance.

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